

VZCZCXYZ0006
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0442/01 1711420
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 191420Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5101
INFO RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 7336
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 5590
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0878
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 4936
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 3662
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAHLC/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGVA/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0625
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0428

UNCLAS DAMASCUS 000442

SIPDIS

NEA/ELA; ANKARA FOR FOLEY; AMMAN FOR NUTZMAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF PHUM PREL SY IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SCENE SETTER FOR AMB FOLEY: EBBS AND FLOWS OF REFUGEE ASSISTANCE/RESETTLEMENT IN SYRIA

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Since your October 2007 visit to Damascus, there have been significant changes, both positive and negative, with respect to how international organizations and the SARG are coping with the Iraqi refugee population. Assistance continues to flow in and the UN country team, in coordination with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and international NGOs, has stepped up programs and assistance to Iraqi refugees. Resettlement of the most vulnerable Iraqis to the United States, as well as other countries, continues at a swift pace and UNHCR and IOM expect to hit resettlement targets before the end of the fiscal year. At the same time, a recent UN study and anecdotal evidence suggests life for Iraqi refugees in Syria has become more difficult than in previous years. Refugee anxiety is up over ever-changing visa requirements, with SARG ambiguity on the matter fueling concern. Global fuel and food inflation has been exacerbated by the SARG's recent decision to significantly reduce diesel subsidies. The resulting across-the-board increase in prices for nearly all goods and services has strained the refugee community's dwindling resources, causing additional stress on families and prompting some to return to Iraq. End Summary.

Assistance

[1](#)2. (SBU) UNHCR & INGOs: UNHCR staffing and organization increased significantly from 2007 to 2008. Additionally, UNHCR implemented new registration strategies, cash and food assistance aid, and sought to establish more clinics and registration centers throughout Syria.

[1](#)3. (SBU) As of June 2008, UNHCR had registered 203,982 Iraqis and is targeting 300,000 by the end of the year. UNHCR officials admit that the target is ambitious, and anticipate actually registering about 270,000 by year's end.

[1](#)4. (SBU) As of April, three major INGOs had received SARG permission to operate in Syria) International Medical Corps (IMC), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and Premier Urgence. IMC has opened one clinic, with plans to open two more in the coming months. The DRC and Premiere Urgence have also started operations in support of UNHCR community services and education programs. More than a dozen other INGOs are actively exploring options to work with Iraqi refugees in Syria, and the SARC's newly drafted MOU on NGOs -- which dropped some of the more onerous requirements -- may facilitate their entry into Syria. UNHCR, accompanied by other members of the UN country team, now conducts monthly coordination meetings with all organizations involved in Iraqi refugee relief efforts. These meetings serve as an excellent forum to share information, dispel myth and direct/deconflict aid assistance.

[1](#)5. (SBU) UNHCR and WFP food distribution to Iraqi refugees

was interrupted in April when the main distribution site in central Damascus was closed. UNHCR representatives reported that the SARG had informed them near the start of the year that they were looking to reclaim the land being used by the distribution center for one of the Syrian First Lady's "Discovery Zone" projects - play areas for children. UNHCR was able to continue food distribution outside of Damascus and plans to reopen a new food distribution center, to be located at the current registration center in Duma, sometime before the end of June. While the new site will be less convenient for Iraqis to reach, UNHCR representatives believe a combined registration/food distribution site will, in effect, offer one stop shopping for Iraqis seeking assistance. The addition of a food distribution center to the Duma registration center adds to the already substantial development of the registration complex. Over the past six months the Duma registration center has undergone a metamorphosis, with the creation of child-friendly spaces, a snack bar, and additional interview and meetings rooms. UNHCR has been able to create a space that provides a measure of dignity for waiting refugees while increasing the efficiency and number of UNHCR staff at the same time. Wait times for registration continue to decline, with the time it takes for the completion of registration hovering around two months, down from the six-month wait one could have expected in early 2007.

¶6. (SBU) As many Iraqi refugees have melted discreetly into Syria's urban neighborhoods, UNHCR has sought to expand its outreach activities and contact those individuals who might not be aware of assistance options. This year, UNHCR also established a mobile registration program in an effort to assist refugees with minimal ability to travel to the Duma registration center. Additionally, there are currently 47 outreach workers (drawn from the Iraqi community) working with UNHCR in greater Damascus to locate and provide assistance to Iraqis who have yet to register with UNHCR. Among the most vulnerable, nearly 250 survivors of gender-based sexual violence have been identified in 2008.

¶7. (SBU) Direct assistance from UNHCR is now available in two forms:

Cash Assistance:

- In December 2007, UNHCR started distributing ATM cards to Iraqi refugees that were identified as urgently needing financial assistance. To date, 13,245 individuals are receiving financial assistance through the ATM card system.

Food and Non-Food Item Assistance:

- UNHCR in partnership with WFP have expanded their criteria for food and non-food item assistance to include over 90 percent of registered refugees as of the beginning of 2008. Already, 128,357 people in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hassakeh have received food assistance since early 2008. (Note: Refugees residing in Syria since before 2003 are not eligible to receive this assistance. End note.)

¶8. (SBU) Education: The SARG claims to provide free education to all Iraqis in Syria.

- Though numbers vary and the school year has ended, an estimated 50,000 Iraqi children are registered in Syrian schools. Many Iraqi children are either not enrolled or are dropping out of school because of a lack of documentation (especially for grades 7-12), overcrowded schools, financial difficulties, problems with the Syrian national curriculum or psychological trauma.

- In 2008, UNHCR's Education Program established new partnerships with local and international partners while remaining committed to supporting the Ministry of Education, its largest partner for education.

¶9. (SBU) Health Care: UNHCR's main implementing partner to date is the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). In 2008, UNHCR signed an agreement with the SARC for over USD 5,256,543 for emergency assistance to Iraqi refugees, and another agreement for health care. SARC operates 11 clinics across Syria, with seven located in the greater Damascus area.

- Health care continues to be the biggest drain on UNHCR budgeting, as medical assistance is provided to many with

chronic illnesses or that require costly operations -)
assistance not traditionally provided to refugee populations.

-In March 2008, UNHCR and WHO conducted a joint program for 30 psychiatrists to "train-the-trainers" to identify refugees with mental health problems. This program is expected to support 70 primary health care clinics in providing mental health care for Iraqi refugees.

-All refugees who apply for a UNHCR registration appointment, or who are already registered with UNHCR are eligible for subsidized health care at SARC clinics.

Resettlement

¶10. (SBU) UNHCR: In April, DHS switched to a Monday-Friday work week to give UNHCR an additional work-week day to use the shared interviewing rooms. UNHCR continues to be interested in moving DHS interviews to their Duma registration center, but this location does not meet USG security standards. In the mean time UNHCR is conducting (limited) construction at their Kfar Souseh location to add interview rooms and increase processing capacity.

¶11. (SBU) Panel Physicians: Post organized monthly coordination meetings improved case flow between IOM and the physicians. Distribution of cases between physicians is now more equitable and IOM is giving caseload projections farther out. Operational issues (typos on documentation, scheduling extended families together) are being resolved.

¶12. (SBU) DHS: Modifications to DHS interview booths in April 2008 improved the quality of interviews. The current "circuit ride" is on target to interview 580-600 cases by July 9. Next circuit ride is scheduled for Aug 9) Sept 20, although these circuit riders have not yet been granted visas.

¶13. (SBU) Over the last six months, IOM Damascus standardized its processes and reports that all staff members are now fully trained on WRAPS and all applicant information is processed into WRAPS. IOM has prepared and scheduled all cases for the current DHS circuit ride through July 9. However, no cases for the DHS circuit ride beginning August 9 are ready, as IOM is waiting for cases from UNHCR. IOM currently has six of its IOM Cairo staff working on the IOM Damascus caseload. Additionally, IOM Damascus provided four staffers to IOM Amman to assist with Amman's casework and interviewing. IOM Damascus established better interaction with air carriers to guarantee flights for resettlement, as all individuals departing in June and July have reservations while August and September departures are almost all reserved. IOM would like to use the summer "slow" season to provide additional management training for team leaders, with Amman being preferable to Cairo as a training site due to its proximity. By the end of the fiscal year, IOM expects that roughly 4,000 Iraqis will have departed Damascus for the United States.

Iraqi Returns

¶14. (SBU) The number of Iraqis returning home has increased this year, although the determining factors behind their decision to leave Syria seem largely financially-based. A UNHCR flash survey of 110 Iraqis at their Damascus registration center revealed that 46.1 percent of respondents justified their return to Iraq because they felt they could no longer afford to live in Syria.

¶15. (SBU) Visa expiration is also a factor in Iraqi returns. The SARG and the top levels of the MFA have been amenable on the issue of visa extensions, especially in the cases of parents with children attending school in Syria. The SARG recently began issuing one to three month residency visas to permit such families to remain over the summer and until the beginning of the next school year. While there seems to be support for Iraqi refugees at the higher levels of the MFA, with senior SARG officials giving UNHCR assurances that there will be no forced repatriation of Iraqi refugees, reports indicate that lower level employees at points of entry are turning away Iraqi visa applicants despite SARG policy.

UNHCR reports a rising anxiety among Iraqi refugees on the issue of visa renewals, and the possibility that the SARG might not honor its commitment to continue to allow Iraqis to maintain a legal presence in Syria.

¶16. (SBU) UNHCR survey data suggests that refugees seeking to return to Iraq due to a perceived improvement of the security situation in Iraq accounted for 14 percent of respondents. UNHCR remains prepared to facilitate voluntary returns, but is not encouraging or promoting returns at this time.

Palestinian Iraqi Refugees

¶17. (SBU) Resident representatives of donor countries continue to seek a solution for the nearly 2,000 Palestinians in Al-Walid and 750 in Al-Tanf. According to UNHCR, neither the Al-Tanf nor the Al-Walid camps have sufficient infrastructure for sustained human settlement. Chile resettled 116 Iraqi Palestinians living in the Al-Tanf camp in April and May. The Swedish government interviewed several Palestinian refugees in Al-Tanf in May, and will likely accept a similar number as Chile for resettlement in Sweden. While resettlement to a third country remains an option, it would be preferable for the Syrian government to permit these Iraqi Palestinians to settle elsewhere within Syria.

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